

Did I Really See That?

ANONYMOUS

It was a dark night late in December in the mountains of southeastern Wyoming. My family and I were traveling on Interstate 80 in my dad's Ford F150. My brother was getting married, and we were driving nonstop from southeast Nebraska to Seattle. At a refueling stop, I prepared for my driving shift with a quick stretch and a nice warm cup of coffee. I settled in for the unenviable task that lay ahead—driving the dreaded 2 to 6 a.m. shift (the time when the body desperately wants to sleep). The pickup had a shell, and earlier I'd caught some sleep on a mattress in the truck's bed* while someone else drove. I felt pretty good about handling my driving shift, so, as soon as everyone had finished going to the bathroom, we set off.

There had been intermittent snowstorms throughout the day. While some snow was beginning to stick to the road, most of it was blowing and drifting out into the black, cold night. By 3:30 a.m., it had been a long time since I'd seen another car in my rearview mirror. Radio stations faded fast in that terrain, leaving only the "Z-Monster" to talk to me as my co-drivers slept.

As I crested a small hill, I saw what looked like a large donkey (presumably dead) in the middle of my lane and swerved into the passing lane to miss it. Luckily, I'd seen the animal in time to maintain control of the pickup while avoiding it. Now fully awake, I pulled back into my lane and glanced into the mirror. Unfortunately, it was much too dark to confirm what I saw.

The rest of the drive was relatively uneventful, and we managed to make it to Seattle alive. This incident happened many years ago, long before I'd heard the words "risk" and "management" used in the same sentence. Looking back, it's easy to identify the hazards of that trip; driver fatigue being the foremost. Although easily avoided, driver fatigue is a very common factor in vehicle accidents. There are several things I could have done to control that hazard. I should've planned enough time for the trip to avoid having to drive straight through. I should've ensured I had an alert co-driver to help me stay awake. Taking more frequent breaks and changing drivers more often could've also helped reduce boredom and driver fatigue.

I'll never know if what I saw that night was a real donkey or a highway hallucination. What I do know is if there'd been traffic in the oncoming lane or I'd been speeding, I might not be here to tell this tale. Don't count on being lucky enough to live and learn; be smart enough to learn and live.

*** Editor's note: Riding in the bed of a pickup is extremely dangerous because you have no restraint system and little or no protection during a crash. In addition, if you're riding in an open pickup bed, you could be thrown onto the street during an accident and hit by other vehicles. Also, sleeping on a mattress in the bed of a moving pickup is not conducive to optimal rest.**

-- Editors note: The author's name was withheld by request. If you would like to publish a story anonymously in Knowledge, please contact the editor by email at knowledge@crc.army.mil.

Your Mind Will Play Tricks

BOB VAN ELSBERG

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I can tell you from experience that fatigue will deceive your mind as surely as hallucinogenic drugs and lead to bizarre breaks from reality. I experienced two of these highway hallucinations when driving from Seattle to San Diego and back (1,255 miles each way) on a five-day pass. I'll share them with you.

I was about 800 miles into the return leg of the trip when my mind started playing tricks on me. First, I "saw" people walking across Interstate 5 in front of me. I nailed the brakes and almost stopped, only to realize there was nobody there. That shook me, but I kept on driving—after all, I had to get back before the morning formation. A little later, I thought I saw the lights of an 18-wheeler either stopped or moving very slowly ahead. Once again I hit the brakes, only to discover those lights were just stars low on the horizon. Now I was scared. I'd been drinking coffee and had eaten a bowl of chili hot enough to melt the chrome off a bumper. But it didn't really matter. No amount of caffeine, spicy food, cold air or loud music could replace what my brain really needed—sleep.

Some of you just got back from Iraq and will be heading home on block leave. Before you tackle any marathon road trips, go online to <https://cra.army.mil> and check out the ASMS-2 POV Risk Assessment Tool. It takes maybe 10 minutes to do an assessment, and you'll have a chance to consider such safety issues as the weather, how far you intend to drive and how frequently you plan to take breaks. Don't just assume, as I did, that because I'd stood 24-hour duty I could safely drive that long.

We didn't have ASMS when I took my trip. By the time my leader had a chance to get involved, I was about to pass out at formation. He put me on quarters, but only after he tore a strip off my butt for being so stupid. From experience, I can tell you it's better to get your leaders involved in mitigating risks BEFORE you set off!

Because some of you can't get to a computer, I've included a few tips to help you:

Schedule your trip to avoid driving during normal sleep hours (don't fight your body's internal clock).

Ensure you're completely rested before departing and returning (eight hours is best).

Plan at least a 15-minute rest stop every two hours (take a few extra minutes to eat your meals at a restaurant, not behind the wheel.

However, eat light because heavy meals will make you sleepy).

Limit driving to no more than eight hours on the road.